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A SUBMISSION TO

THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE

FROM

THE CATHOLIC COMMISSION FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE

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AUSTRÁLIA

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace

The Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace was established in 1968 by the Catholic Bishops of Australia. The Commission seeks to promote human development and social justice and, to this end, studies the conditions under which people live, both in Australia and overseas; identifies major injustices and anlyses specific issues. The framework of values within which the Commission works is drawn from the Bible and from the social teachings of the Catholic Church. Although the Commission acts in an advisory capacity to the Bishops, it does not speak for them and generally acts on its own behalf in the pursuit of its objectives.

1.2 November, 1975

On November, 27, 1975, the Commission sent a telegram to the then caretaker Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr. Andrew Peacock, condemning the reported Indonesian attack on the town of Atabae, and declaring its support for the right of the East Timorese people to be the architects of their social and economic development. A press release was issued containing the text of the telegram. These actions marked the Commission's formal involvement in the East Timor issue. Indonesia invaded East Timor on December 7, 1975.

2. HISTORY OF THE COMMISSION'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE EAST TIMOR ISSUE

2.1 January, 1976

Consistent with the Commission's advisory role vis-a-vis the Bishops, the Commission's Secretary wrote to all the Bishops on January 12, 1976, to advise them of the events in East Timor.

2.2 March 1976

At its March, 1976 meeting, the Commission developed a comprehensive policy on East Timor. The Commission called on the Australian Government to

"1 Seek the withdrawal of all Indonesian troops from East Timor.

2 Press for the establishment of neutral zones in East Timor to permit the return of the International Red Cross, the continuance of humanitarian relief and the evacuation of refugees.

3 Provide facilities to enable refugees to be brought to Australia and accommodated here.

4 Support a genuine act of self-determination in East Timor. The vehicle for the exercise of this right should be a United Nations supervised election in which all political groupings can participate.

5 Press for a general amnesty, once the fighting is over, for all individuals and groups involved in the fighting."

This policy was similar to that developed by a number of other Australian Non-Government Organisations active in the fields of social justice and development. It was also similar to the policy which was ultimately adopted by the Australian Government, a policy which received widespread public support.

2.3 Catholic Bishops' Statement — September 1976

On September 3, 1976, The Australian Episcopal Conference issued a statement which expressed concern for the suffering of the East Timorese people and support for the Australian Government's policy. The Bishops also called for the admission of international humanitarian aid into East Timor and for the Indonesian and Australian governments to facilitate the reunification of East Timorese families separated by the conflict.

2.4 December 1976

On December 6, 1976, the Commission issued a press release which condemned the Australian Government's abstention from voting at the United Nations "... on a General Assembly resolution, the substance of which was in complete agreement with the stated policy of the Australian Government". The press release also revealed that "highly reliable sources" (Catholic Church sources in East Timor, Indonesia and Rome) had confirmed that the Indonesians were in control of only a minority of the East Timorese population and that the

Indonesian Red Cross was limiting the distribution of relief supplies to areas under Indonesian control. Accordingly, the Commission again sought the admission of international humanitarian aid and again pleaded for the Government to consider the plight of refugees, especially those in Portugal.

2.5 March 1977 — Letter to Parliament

The Commission wrote to all members of the Australian Parliament on March 23, 1977, supporting the proposal that a full and impartial parliamentary inquiry be held into all aspects of the East Timor situation. The letter argued that "such an inquiry would enable a thorough evaluation of present and past responses to all aspects of the East Timor situation and (that it) would be an excellent mechanism for providing factual information to the Australian community". The letter also suggested that the Parliament had an important role to play in informing public opinion and that genuine democracy was impossible without a well-informed electorate.

2.6 Australian Recognition of Indonesian Integration of East Timor

A press release issued on January 22, 1978, questioned the Australian Government's decision to recognise the incorporation of East Timor into Indonesia. The Government's action was considered over-hasty, given the spate of conflicting reports about the extent of Indonesian control and of resistance to the invasion. The Commission also thought it inappropriate for Australia to act as a pace-setter within the international community in relation to the recognition of the act of incorporation. The statement also questioned whether the Government's decision would contribute to the resolution of the humanitarian issues arising from the conflict.

2.7 British Report

In a press release issued on February 23, 1982, the Commission publicised a report on East Timor published by the (British) Catholic Institute for International Relations. The report was critical of the policies of Western governments on East Timor and argued that Australia failed to utilise its "unique position to influence events in Timor". The report identifies the main problems of East Timor today as hunger, disease and refugees, and points out that these cannot ultimately be separated from the wider issues of human rights.

2.8 Other Action

In addition to the above, the Commission has participated in the organisation of a vigil and of a number of public meetings and has publicised the East Timor issue via radio interviews and talks to different organisations. The Commission, together with other agencies in the over-

Australia-East Timor Association (NSW). The main function of the association was, again, to remind the Australian public of the seriousness of events taking place in East Timor. As well as these more public actions, efforts were made to inform sister Commissions and similar bodies in other countries of the situation in East Timor and to seek their support in raising the issue within a broader international context.

2.9 Summary

The Commission has, in summary, been involved in the East Timor issue in four major ways:

1 It has made a number of public statements.

2 It has made representations to the Australian Government, keeping before it the Commission's policy. It has also written to the Indonesian and Portuguese governments.

3 It has communicated with a number of organisations overseas and has been involved in a number of public actions in an effort to publicise the issue.

4 Together with Australian Catholic Relief, it has acted in an advisory capacity to the Australian Episcopal Conference..

Three themes have been consistently emphasised in our East Timor policy over the past six years:

1 The need for a genuine act of self-determination on the part of the East Timorese people;

2 The importance of effective humanitarian aid; and

3 The plight of East Timorese refugees.

3 WHAT OF THE FUTURE?

3.1 East Timor in Perspective

What needs to be emphasised is that East Timor, only 300 miles north of Australia, has suffered a tragedy of major proportions. There are three dimensions to this tragedy:

—The first is that, as a direct result of the Indonesian invasion, 50,000 - 100,000 people have died (some estimates are higher than this) out of a population of 650—680,000 (1974 estimate).[1]

—The second is the enormous disruption suffered by the country's economy and society as a result of the original Indonesian invasion and continuing occupation.

—The third is that a colonial people who had begun to develop a sense of their own identity, as evinced by the rapid growth of political parties in 1974, has been denied the right to further develop as a people. What must also not be forgotten is that the two major political parties prior to the invasion, the UDT and Fretilin, who between them enjoyed the support of the overwhelming majority of East Timorese, both saw independence as the desirable goal of East Timorese development.

3.2 Policy in the Long-Term

The Commission believes that the long-term objective of Australian Government policy should be to ensure that a genuine act of self-determination takes place in East Timor. Most probably this will prove impossible without the participation of the wider international community — especially Portugal, Australia, the US, the non-aligned nations (who have consistently supported East Timorese independence) and the United Nations. Such a negotiated settlement will quite obviously be the end-product of a lengthy process of discussion and negotiation.

3.3 Policy in the Medium-Term

In the medium-term, we believe that the Australian Government should do everything in its power to ensure that the Indonesian authorities allow the maximum possible social and cultural autonomy to the East Timorese people.

3.4 Policy in the Short-Term

The Australian Government needs to address itself urgently to four areas:

1 The need for humanitarian aid (especially food and medicines);

2 The plight of East Timorese refugees in Portugal who want to migrate to Australia.

3 The incomplete family reunion program.

4 The need for independent observers to be allowed into East Timor in order to gather accurate information regarding the situation there and to look into claims of continuing human rights violations.

4 CONCLUSION

Six years have passed since the Indonesian invasion of East Timor. Quite apart from the major issue of self-determination some progress has been made in the areas of humanitarian aid and refugees/family reunion. It must be pointed out, however, that even the little progress that has occurred has happened excruciatingly slowly. The Commission believes that Australian policy and action in relation to East Timor need to be imbued with a new sense of urgency. We sincerely hope that the Senate Committee's report will serve to reawaken this sense of urgency.

FOOTNOTE:

1. See, for example, *The Bulletin*, December 18, 1979, pp. 70-77
   The Economist, May 26, 1979, p. 77
   The Guardian Weekly, May 27, 1979
   The International Herald Tribune, May 25, 1979
   New Statesman, May 4, 1979
   Notes on the Current Situation in East Timor, Jim Dunn, Legistlative Research Service, Canberra, March 8, 1979, p. 9